

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata No. 1 in D major, Op. 12, No. 1

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn

Died: March 27, 1827, in Vienna

Work composed: 1797–98

In 1787, **Beethoven's** friends raised money for the young composer-pianist to journey to Vienna for study with Mozart. The rapid decline and death of his mother however, forced a prompt return to Beethoven's hometown. By the time he returned to Vienna in 1792 his intended mentor Mozart had been dead for a year. Still wanting to improve his prospects for a successful career in what was considered the unquestioned musical capital of Europe, Beethoven set his sights on Haydn, pre-eminent composer of the day. Because composition lessons with Haydn did not go especially well Beethoven began studying vocal writing with the unfairly maligned Antonio Salieri and counterpoint with Johann Albrechtsburger.

In 1797 and '98 Beethoven composed his three **Op. 12 sonatas for "piano and violin"** (standard listing of such works at the time), dedicating them to Salieri. All three works reflect Beethoven's absorption of the high classicism of both Mozart and Haydn with strong hints of his own increasingly assertive and heightened emotional style.

The sonatas share certain features: they are all in three movements of which the first is typically the most exploratory and inventive, the second highly expressive and the finale scintillating and unfailingly upbeat. They also fall into that category termed *Hausmusik*, i.e., music composed for performance by skilled amateurs, unlike the remaining seven violin and piano sonatas, which were written for professional virtuosos. Despite the designation mentioned above as sonatas for "piano and violin," Beethoven strove as ever for parity among the instrumentalists. Neither violin nor piano can boast of clear dominance, despite Beethoven's primary performing career as a pianist. (He was, of course, no slouch on violin and viola.)

Marked *Allegro con brio*, the first movement asserts itself with a bold ascending unison theme played by both partners before a new intimate and lyrical tune is initiated by the violin and picked up by the piano. Having already written several chamber works, Beethoven shows great skill in achieving a conversational give-and-take atmosphere throughout the movement. After cannily building up palpable excitement Beethoven-the-jokester (a trait shared with Haydn), he all but brings the forward motion to a halt by giving the piano a calmer tune that leads to a stately procession of chordal harmonies. After a brief episode in the unexpected key of F major, Beethoven ends the movement back in the bright D-major tonality of the tonic key.

The ensuing *Tema con variazioni: Andante con moto* in A major demonstrates Beethoven's early mastery of variation form. The lovely two-part theme is introduced by the piano and restated by the violin before the two instruments switch roles. The first variation belongs to the piano, tastefully if minimally accompanied by the string player. In the following variation the violin rhapsodizes over a keyboard accompaniment. The penultimate and increasingly passionate variation cast in A minor achieves parity in the two roles. The final variation returns to the major mode and brings the emotionally varied movement to a gentle and serene close.

As befits a classical period piece the concluding *Rondo: Allegro* in 6/8 time abounds in good cheer, amplified by off-the-beat *sforzandos* (a Beethoven trademark to be sure) and anticipates the frequent use of syncopated passages that play an increasingly vital role in Beethoven's music. The delightful dance-like ambience, less courtly than affectionately rustic, exults in unforced exuberance.

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